European journal of American studies
Reviews 2017-2

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12167
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Christina Dokou, « Eric Carl Link and Gerry Canavan, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2017-2, document 3, Online since 01 August 2017, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12167

Eric Carl Link and Gerry Canavan, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*

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2 The Cambridge Companion Series. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 254 ISBN: 978-1-107-05246-8.

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5 This volume proclaims itself the successor of the earlier (2003) *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, and indeed adheres to the key virtues of the previous volume: it features a helpfully cleanly-structured approach (complete with a very useful chronology in the front part), impressive bibliographical backing, and a well-diversified team of knowledgeable and clearly dedicated contributors, two of which are featured in both anthologies—with Darko Suvin, though not a listed contributor, given honorary participant status here as he is cited in practically every single article in the volume. It also has the benefit of a dozen extra years of scholarship to add to the sophistication of its outlook. However, this diversity of the contributors' foci and the engaging broadness of spectrum it augurs are slightly blunted by the predominantly historiographical approach that informs the entire collection in a defining manner, offering on the one hand the benefit of cohesion and consistency, but on the other bringing with it a sense of stiffness from a rather extensive adherence to historicized fact listing. It also leads to overlap in a couple of cases, as for example the seminal contribution of *Amazing Stories* editor, Hugo Gernsback, to the field of science fiction (SF) is repeated, more or less, on three different occasions—something that could have been avoided easily, as it is evident from note references that the contributors were aware of each other's material. The overlap, moreover, may be said to extend, to a degree,

to the earlier volume, since—as a few articles in the later volume judiciously note—American SF does define, in terms of both constitutive tropes and cultural significance, what SF, or "speculative fiction" as some prefer to call it, internationally came to be, while "SF has served as an important pop cultural medium for the exchange of such ideas in the United States and beyond" (Canavan and Link, "Introduction" 10). Oddly, then, though usually it is the later volumes on a subject that tend to branch out to various theory-or theme-informed directions, here the trend is reversed, with the earlier volume being more thusly structured, and the later volume more entropic and geared towards the fundamentals regarding SF. Of course, Carl Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, published in 2000, addresses quite well the theoretical aspect of SF studies, and is very much taken into account in many of the foundational observations offered in the articles on utopianism, for example, so the SF scholar is not left wanting in the end.

6 That having been said, there is much to learn here, especially for the neophyte SF scholar. Canavan and Link wisely chose to offer a greater quantity of short articles instead of fewer longer ones, thus facilitating ease of access without really sacrificing adequacy of information. After convincingly arguing the claim of SF being a quintessentially American construct, the editors' "Introduction" grounds the massive and pervasive influence of SF, especially as a vehicle for the worldwide communication of cultural trends and questions. They attribute this potency on the huge dissemination of SF production through all kinds of media; its affinity with the global cultural questions concerning the geometrically-rising influence of technology on the future of humankind and on our relationship with the Other; and its long, albeit clandestine, tradition that begins with the European Enlightenment and, passing through the Gothic and Darwinian scientifism, reaches its apogee with the American frontier myth (be it utopian or apocalyptic), especially as this meshes with the American bend towards self-affirmation through primacy in technoscience. The "Introduction" concludes with a presentation of the tripartite structure of the volume—concerned, respectively, with the history, the form, and the thematic concerns of the genre—though, as noted above, the historical approach prevails.

7 "PART I: Histories and Contexts" begins with Gary Westfahl's "The Mightiest Machine: The Development of American Science Fiction from the 1920s to the 1960s" which chronicles precisely how SF became an American genre for the 20th-21st century: "it was largely due to the work of Hugo Gernsback, who provided an inchoate genre with a name, persuasive arguments for its special importance, and a support system of organized fans; he also promulgated...a characteristic narrative" (18). The article details how these three factors, as well as the contribution of Gernsback's successor, John W. Cambell Jr., of one final element, "intellectual respectability" (18), came into effect and affected the growth and eventual pop dominance of SF. The golden age of the 1920s-40s eventually declined through an exhaustion of the "space opera" scenario and the rise of the British "New Wave" in the 60s, which led to a final global balancing of contributions among cultures; nevertheless, American tropes and themes had been meanwhile established as standard SF constituent elements.

8 Chapter 2 features Darren Harris-Fain's account of "Dangerous Visions: New Wave and Post-New Wave Science Fiction." Although the New Wave was predominantly British, Harris-Fain chronicles carefully the influence this aesthetic (and politicized) movement had on American SF production as well, countering its conservative ideology and becoming a vehicle for revolutionary politics. New Wave authors, critics, and editors like Harlan Ellison, Robert A. Heinlein, and Frank Herbert not only introduced novel and

shocking themes into SF like "sex and violence, as well as drug use" (33), gender-bending fantasies, and radical ecological, racial, and religious politics, but also helped rescue SF from its detractors and blended its production with mainstream literature through the work of writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Samuel R. Delany. Eventually, then, though the New Wave gave way to Reagan-era conservativism, its foothold into quality literature spread and diversified in tandem with new concerns introduced by technological progress and postmodernism.

9 This conclusion leads into David M. Higgins's "American Science Fiction after 9/11," focusing on the way the genre responded to a real historical challenge brought about by emergent conditions of globality. Higgins astutely blends gender with genre concerns to suggest how a modern sense of anxiety regarding a certain threat to, or loss of, American manhood "trapped within a false or simulated world (44), is envisioned, explored, and *exploited* in mainly two SF scenarios: "First, the trope of the alien encounter (or alien invasion) is reformulated and redeployed during this period to address...threats ranging from terrorism and biological attacks to natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina" (45); "Second, an intensification of technoscientific advancement and neoliberal capitalist expansion leads to a pervasive experience in the West during this time that many Americans (and others) are themselves living in a science fictional milieu" (45). Higgins shows convincingly how the threat of alien or zombie invasion that casts the American human in the role of the wronged victim, "enables the protagonist in such stories to self-identify as a kind of fantastical hyper-victim entitled to absolute revenge in the face of external oppression" (49). There are, however, post-9/11 strands of SF, known mostly as "slipstream" literature to denote their divergence from any usual form, that explore this loss of (masculine or human) agency and subjectivity with a more accepting mind, considering the matrix, the "contemporary novum" (50), as an inevitable situation we should seek to benefit from, or as a world imposed by Homeland Security-like agencies already and equally or more pernicious than the projections of SF.

10 Economic and political inequality gives way to explorations of racial inequality in Lisa Yaszek's "Afrofuturism in American Science Fiction." Contrary to popular views of SF as an overwhelmingly white male domain, Yaszek offers an alternative history of SF evolution: "For nearly two hundred years African Americans have used a mode of speculative fiction called 'Afrofuturism' to dramatize the issues most important to people of color living in a tehnocultural world" (58). She goes on to review this history—which runs parallel to "white" SF as black authors preferred their own publishing houses to mainstream ones—noting its most prominent contributors, from Martin Delany's inaugural *Blake or the Huts of America* (1859) to the gender-and race-bending work of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany to, finally, Nigerian-born Nnedi Okorafor, who "uses the techniques of Afrofuturism to explore how Africans grapple with the lingering alienation of the various colonial pasts while combining Eurowestern and African technoscientific traditions to build new futures" (67).

11 Alexis Lothian's "Feminist and Queer Science Fiction in America" picks up the thread of the two previous articles, this time exploring gender inequality and innovation in the genre. Although the article could perhaps have benefited from an embedding within queer theory outside the specific area of SF (Butler or Halberstam, for example, are absent, though either would be relevant and several of their conclusions are implicit in the bibliography cited), Lothian does an expert job elaborating on how the speculative nature of the genre became an ideal vehicle for experimentations with, and questionings

of, gender and sex figurations. She also shows convincingly how this "feminist science fiction" (70) went hand-in-hand, or even heralded, broader changes in the cultural mores or scientific knowledge regarding gender and/or sex, beginning with 19th-century utopianism featuring feminist or lesbian paradigms, then moving on to question the sex/gender status quo—in which, as the saying goes, "the personal is political"—in the 20th century (though, as the author notes, those works produced "have often focused intensively on gendered power relations as experienced by white, middle-class American women"—74). The article proceeds to examine examples of speculations on how queer reproduction patterns would affect gender relationships, as well as those rare but interesting examples of alternate expressions of desire in SF. Finally, it discusses how this fiction has engendered and empowered in the real world "amateur creativity and grassroots activism," as well as "publishing—bringing into print the work of authors whose creative texts challenge and explore what might be possible for gender as it intersects with other modes of difference" (80).

12 Part I concludes with Mark Bould's "The Futures Market: American Utopias," which brings together much on the subject already mentioned in other chapters, though unfortunately relying heavily on lists of works. Bould smartly connects Thomas More's concept of utopia to an American context, namely *The Constitution of the Iroquois Nations* and the Puritan imaginings of "a city upon a hill" (84-85), and goes on to list a great number of American works, some of which are widely identified as utopian fiction, some not. He devotes a special subchapter to "African-American Utopianism" (88) that, although showcasing different texts, has much in common with the earlier chapter on Afrofuturism. The final part of the article is perhaps the most interesting, examining, from the point of view of leftist cultural criticism, the political gestures effected through SF figurations of either capitalist consumerist utopias-turned-dystopias, or of alternative utopias, drawn from anti-capitalist, third world/indigenous community contexts that "defy the deadening diktats of (eco-catastrophic, white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative) capitalist realism" (94).

13 PART II, titled "Media and Form," focuses on the various expressive conduits that shape SF in novel and diverse ways. Rob Latham offers a very informative reading of "American Slipstream: Science Fiction and Literary Respectability," tackling what has been a nagging concern for genres such as comics, fantasy fiction, and science fiction. Although the introductory history of the status of the genre, which until the 1960s "was still largely seen as popular reading material by contrast with more serious kinds of writing" (99), repeats much already discussed in earlier chapters, the part of the article dealing with the post-1990s situation has much to offer. It was then that "slipstream" appeared to rescue SF from its commercialized decay. The term, coined by Bruce Sterling in 1989, was "a kind of writing that 'set its face against consensus reality,' often by deploying surreal or other avant-garde techniques, and that as a consequence made readers 'feel very strange' the way that living in the twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility'" (Sterling qtd. in Latham 100-01). Slipstream ironically became responsible for the mainstreaming (and hence acquisition of respectability) by SF, since by grafting postmodern techniques and themes into the genre made it relevant and noteworthy again. Hence, increasingly, "young authors...seem more willing—even eager—to move beyond traditional literary boundaries" into science and fantasy fiction (107).

14 Sherryl Vint's "Hollywood Science Fiction" offers an indispensable element in the volume, since for the majority of SF consumers/prosumers, the genre has been

experienced through the moving picture of (blockbuster) cinema or television, or the hybrid art of the comic book: as she states, by way of introduction, "Hollywood dominates the medium, and not always to the genre's benefit" (111). Vint's well-crafted narrative chronicles this struggle between the depiction of an engaging and fruitful interrogation of the "problems of technologized modernity" (111) on the one hand, and crass commercial exploitation pandering to the lowest common denominator of a viewer on the other. The genre moved from a slew of "mad scientist," superhero and alien invader stock films in the 1930s-40s to the more technologically-sophisticated escapist blockbusters of the 1960s (like *Star Wars*) that spread on to televised serials, until the 1980s, when the blockbuster superhero franchise began (bumpily at first) its rise to its current dominant and super-lucrative status. The end of the 20th century also records a marked change in attitudes towards science, which is now presented as a matrix that is inevitable and can perhaps allow us to reap beneficial rewards. Finally, in the 21st century, dizzying technoscientific advances have made SF imaginings seem more than ever part of real life, interrogating currently developing issues: "*Battlestar Galactica* (2003-9) was invited to the UN in 2009 as part of a panel on contemporary issues of human rights, children in war, and reconciliation of religious difference" (122), marking perhaps a point where fictional sophistication and real-life fictionalization finally meet.

15 Matthew J. Costello's "U.S. Superpower and Superpowered Americans in Science Fiction and Comic Books" would have fit better in Part I next to the article on utopianism, as both pieces are built upon similar thematic and methodological premises. Its argument that superheroes represent "a vision of America coming to terms with wielding its recently acquired global power" (125) is time-affirmed and well-constructed, and dealing with the comics medium adds another significant facet into the general picture of SF development and formation. Costello cleverly matches key moments in comics development to milestones in U.S. history: from the emergence of the SF comic hero (John Carter) in 1912, "on the eve of the Great War" (126), when Americans needed to be introduced to their global responsibilities; to the rise of the superhero comic, heralded by the all-American Superman, marking the World War II and Cold War efforts of the U.S. to create national (ist) cohesion against the enemy; and finally, Vietnam and the War on Terror coinciding with the new generation of unconventional comics (anti-) heroes criticizing openly the imperialist, interventionist American dogma and its dark ramifications. It thus becomes apparent by the end that, indeed, "[t]he American superhero has been intimately tied to the growth and decline of American power over the past century" (136) as a vehicle for this imagined community's self-awareness.

16 "Digital Games and Science Fiction" by Patrick Jagoda covers yet another direction in which SF has spread voluminously, also aided by an in interplay loop with other media (like film, print, or television). While Jagoda initially attempts to separate literary from "ludic genres" based on the latter's dependence on, and realization through interactive technology (139) of "world-making and spatial storytelling" scenarios, it soon becomes apparent that the two genres are quintessentially interwoven. Not only are the above scenarios the stuff upon SF storytelling thrives, but also, the MIT "geeks" who crafted the first videogames (starting with *Spacewar!*) in the 1960s made those games in their own image, like "physics simulations, space-adventures drawn from the science fiction they enjoyed" (Anna Anthropy, qtd. in Jagoda 142). Online role-playing games (MMORPGs and ARGs) grew out of real-life cosplay and RPGs and are the continuation (and massification) of those early fan communities (146). Finally, in a move that he calls from "history" to

"historicity," Jagoda shows how 21st-century gaming is essentially akin to the way contemporary western subjects experience reality, with its immense techno-human interactivity and its looming ethical questions (and hopes, and fears) drawn from advances in biotechnology.

17 "Fandom and Fan Culture" is an article that, in one respect, reiterates what has already been chronicled in the first article of the volume regarding the seminal role played in the development of SF by the organized fan culture that Hugo Gernsback built up; in another respect, however, the author, Karen Hellekson, also goes further historically to register the great change (or "second wave") that came upon fandom in the late 1960s, where the core mass of active fans changed from adolescent boys to adult women who were not just (often derided) consumers, but proud prosumers—via viding, fanfiction, cosplay and other forms of interactive creativity—of SF multimedia. She also notes, importantly, how the advent of the online fan communities in the 1990s ("third wave") may have killed the "communal" feel of traditional fandom structures (158), but has also made exchange easier on a global level and allowed "niche fandoms" to express themselves more broadly and without any taint of "otherness" attached to their activity (158). Although the author's definition of fans as "people who actively engage with something" (153) is rather too broad, in my opinion, Hellekson's knowledgeable treatment of the fan communities allows her to proceed to some very relevant questions pertaining to the present, but also to the future, of fandom: for example, the ethics of the giant entertainment conglomerates luring fans with special promotional "gifts" or exclusive "tidbits" to augment their profiting from the fans' enthusiastic, but unpaid labor (159).

18 PART III: "Themes and Perspectives" is perhaps the most interesting of the three segments, and one would wish it were not also the smallest, with only four articles, one of which (the one on the American Weird) probably would fit better in the first section by virtue of its adherence to a factual history of the development of the term. The section begins with John Rieder's "American Frontiers," which examines how one of the constitutive myths of the United States, the idea of "going West" to the frontier, is smoothly transplanted into SF as "Space: the final frontier" (of *Star Trek*) and the space opera as a reiteration of the pioneer venture, parallel to the idea of technological innovation (or "pushing the boundaries of science," as the cliché goes) as another form of frontier penetration. Finally, the frontier encounter with the alien Other is explored from multiple perspectives, either as a conquest affirming human Manifest Destiny ("assimilation"), or, more and more, as a perplexing but enlightening exchange among cultures ("nativization") that critiques imperialist hubris. Rieder deftly and creatively blends U.S. folklore with SF stock themes to ultimately showcase SF as a new folktale for the U.S. collective national imaginary, but also the relevance of SF as an index of, and an influence upon, cultural ethics and questions.

19 Priscilla Wald's "Science, Technology, and the Environment" is perhaps the best article in the volume for a variety of reasons: not only is the theme very topical, but the author is a fascinating storyteller that combines deftly informative and analytical parts to offer a satisfyingly comprehensive picture of what is a truly labyrinthine issue. Taking as a starting point for discernible eco-concerns in SF the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (179), the article discusses how SF responds to the traumas of Shoah, violent colonization, the increasing interference of technology on human life, with effects ranging from pernicious (pollution, pesticides, radiation, resource depletion, species extinction) to challenges of the very definition of humanity, as with genetic

engineering and cyborg technology. It offers brief, but to-the-point readings of a number of SF texts that synthesize a clear picture of how "SF records the hopes as well as the fears of that future, as humanity ponders its intangibles, and mutants conceived in the laboratories of the imagination become prototypes of transformation" (191).

20 Roger Luckhust's "American Weird" chronicles the history of Clark Hennesberger's pulp series *Weird Tales* (1923-28) and, through it, the treatment of what "weird" has meant and how it has been utilized in SF, if we consider the genre as an indicator of wider cultural attitudes. The article would have benefited from using Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, since it practically flirts with it; but instead opts for a historicized approach. The author traces this brand of weird on both the Puritan ideology coming into contact with the "Devil's territory" and the 1920s efforts of SF and horror authors, citing H. P. Lovecraft's definition of the weird as "[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" leading to "a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space" (qtd. in Luckhurst 195). The weird launched texts that were in turns artful and bombastic, innovative and shocking to U.S. morals, and the author entertainingly points to the spectacular bathos of some of the "masters" of the craft, who nevertheless acquired cult status precisely because of the transcendence into weird this overabundance of bathos effected. This point of entrance into cultdom launches the second part of the article, discussing how the weird became a theoretical and philosophical trope, leading to the British "New Weird" movement in the 21st century (200) and, ultimately, to an ironic self-annulment of the quality of weirdness, as weird, of hybrid origin to begin with, proved "borderless" in its modern applications (202) and eventually was relegated to "a question of *taste*" in "a kind of war on the banality of middlebrow, mainstream literary culture"—a position that many, within and beyond SF, could easily claim (203-04).

21 The final word belongs to Rebekah C. Sheldon, and is aptly titled "After America," discussing from a neo-Marxist perspective texts ranging "[f]rom deregulation farces and sprawling globalization picaresques to postapocalyptic wastescapes" which "reflect increasing commonplace skepticism about the viability of the nation-state in general and of the American project in particular" (206). The author's thesis is that such texts do not reflect futurist projections, but are actually helping us realize and come to terms with what has already been happening in terms of global neoliberal brutalization of the environment and human beings. The three texts she chooses to read closely reflect three such practices, i.e. the illogicality of private property conception ("The Tamarisk Hunter"); the manipulation of human hopes and dreams via "cruel optimism and aspirational debt" (*The Hunger Games*—211); and "the collapse of the social" that impedes isolationist consumerism (*Parable of the Sower*). One has the feel that the analysis is rather hurried and feels unfinished in its separate parts; but the critique makes very valid and original points and reveals a rewarding depth and political poignancy to SF texts. All in all, this is a very carefully crafted anthology, and would be recommended in its totality to people at a beginner level in speculative fiction studies.

22 **Works Cited:**

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